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MUSIC OF THE MONTH

TWO MASTERWORKS RECONSIDERED

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

THREE years after Wagner was translated from Wahnfried to Olympus, Richard Strauss began to compose that extraordinary series of tone-poems for orchestra which have agitated the musical waters as they had not been agitated since the mightier Richard set our grandmothers quarreling with our grandfathers over *Tristan* and the *Ring* and *Meistersinger* (which latter work John Ruskin, in 1882, called "a soulless, sapless, tuneless doggerel of sounds—an eternity of nothing"). The nine tone-poems of Strauss traverse a generation. Their emergence, between the *Macbeth* of 1886 and the *Alpensinfonie* of 1915, challenged every established canon and outraged every tradition of musical art, incited critics to wild debauches of rhapsody and vilification, and engendered a torrent of conflicting epithets the like of which the Heavenly Maid, holding high her imperilled skirts above the swirl of flower-strewn mud, had not witnessed since Brahms so nearly succeeded in disentangling her feet from the primroses of the Wagnerian path and making an honest woman of her.

Ein Heldenleben, which has lately been restored to the American concert list, is the seventh of the amazing nine. It was composed in 1898, and stands between *Don Quixote* (1897) and the *Symphonia Domestica* (1902-03). Its first performance in New York occurred twenty years ago this season (December 7, 1900, by the Philharmonic Society under Emil Paur). Not long after, the azygous James Hunecker—whose early reactions to Strauss are among the classic braveries of musical appreciation—observed in his *Overtures* that "the main thing to record is the overwhelming impression of power, anarchistic if you will, that informs *Ein Heldenleben*." And he impolitely remarked that "to the orthodox, his [Strauss'] avoidance of the normal, the facile, the

smug, and the unoriginal, is a crime against ethics. Repeated hearings convince one," he continued, "regarding Strauss' sincerity. He is working out his own artistic salvation on his own premeditated lines, . . . and he is doomed to mockery until he is understood."

Well, he is understood today—save by that handful of irreconcilables, glorying in their misoneism, who will never comprehend. Strauss is so well understood, indeed, that his place as the chief gadfly of the post-Wagnerian era has been usurped by other and fiercer tormentors of the complacent—by the contemporary insurgents of Italy, France, Russia, England, Austria, and Hungary. Today the international woods are full of musical trouble-makers beside whom Strauss appears as the most law-abiding of the tonal bourgeoisie. But, law-abiding and relatively decorous though he may now seem, that "overwhelming impression of power" noted twenty years ago by the temerarious Huneker still persists; and when the great theme of the Hero which opens *Ein Heldenleben* sweeps up out of the basses in its imperious stride through three octaves: when the strings, after the mid-Victorian coqueties of the solo violin, achieve those soaring flights of passionate declaration in the magnificent love-scene, we are roused anew out of our placidity, exhilarated by the thrilling sense of freedom and power, by the daring, the immense virility, the athletic swiftness and energy, of this unique musical imagination, with its confident mastery of all the agencies of expression: its exhaustless vitality of rhythm, its plastic and far-flung melodic line, its richness of polyphonic speech.

It is true, and has always been true of Strauss, that he would not have satisfied the ideal treasured by the inestimable Miss Evance, who desired in poetic speech

That conversation ever sweet,
Improving, elegant, refined. . . .

and he would not have delighted Johnson, who extolled the style of Addison because it was "familiar but not coarse, elegant but not ostentatious". Strauss, as a creative artist, has to some extent exemplified what Plato called "the unexamined life." He has never been sufficiently scrutinizing, sufficiently challenging and

curious and exigent. He can be blatantly commonplace, cheaply cloying, deplorably coarse-grained, incorrigibly extravagant, depressingly silly. His flagrancies and his virtues are the issue of a curiously naïve psychology. Whether he is playing his gamin pranks, or is awash in sentimental tides, or is uttering grandiose puerilities, or tracing fiery scrolls upon the heavens with an Apocalyptic brush, he is always apparent—a prodigy of infantile perverseness and flaring inspiration: untrained, uncritical, and an authentic Olympian.

Whatever you may regret in him (and his deficiencies and his lapses are so blatant, so glaringly obvious, that it is almost unsportsmanlike to allege them), he is and always has been, as we observed in this place years ago, upon familiar terms with the grand style. It is native to him—as native as to Gluck or Handel, Beethoven or Wagner or Brahms; and he works in it again and again, with ease and freedom and overpowering effect. It is because of this that he is of the royal line, despite the frequency with which, in other matters, he antagonizes and offends. When, in his vein of excellent simplicity, he is at his height, he can stand proudly erect beside the major poets of music. He is upon such heights in the scene of Don Quixote's death, in the love scene of *Ein Heldenleben*, in the recognition scene of *Elektra*, in that stupendous exordium which, in *Zarathustra*, lifts the heart out of the body and stuns the spirit with a sense of nameless revelation. These things, and others like them, are sovereign and imperishable. They are of the great tradition of eloquence nobly plain.

The orchestras have been playing again the most famous of post-Beethovenian symphonies, and again we have been moved to reflect upon its curious and engrossing case. Tchaikovsky's *Pathetic* Symphony has suffered the novel fate of those works of art that profoundly affect the nerves of their generation. It has become, for many who have heard it too often, a little rubbed and coarsened, a little dulled along the edges, a little shopworn by too-eager handling. Twenty years ago the *Pathétique* was making a prodigious stir in the world. It was over-exploited and overplayed, and far too many tears were dropped upon its bowed and tragic head. This music cut very deeply into the nerves and

brains of those of us who were hearing it so often twenty years ago; and the inevitable effect has been weariness and apathy and reaction. So, of late years, the *Pathétique* has fallen upon evil days. The Elder Statesmen of criticism pass it sniffily by—à bas Tchaikovsky, anyway: was he not a bombastic composer of salon-music, after all, and is not the Sixth Symphony merely a pretentious suite? As for *les jeunes*,—those ineffable illuminati of our musical time who have dropped Wagner into the tonal ash-can (the discerning Paul Rosenfeld assures us that Wagner “could not rival” the “unflagging inventive power of Haydn”), who have put Richard Strauss away in the attic along with the photographs of Miss Marie Tempest in the tights of the pagan nineties, the novels of Mr. Marion Crawford, and the collapsible opera-hat, and for whom even Debussy is a wide-eyed innocent at play with his Preraphaelite dolls—well, one hardly dares to wonder what *les jeunes* must think of the *Pathétique*.

This symphony has, in short, lost caste among the Best People: one no longer gets out the choicest table-linen when it comes to dine (as, occasionally, it must be bidden); not for it is the hundred-proof Gordon—there are lesser brands that will suffice. Alas, the poor *Pathétique*! No critic is too obscure a worm or too palpable a cretin to fling a stone in its direction; there is none so poor to do it reverence. It is relegated among Tchaikovsky's lesser works, and finds its proper place, one fancies, somewhere between the *1812* Overture and the *Souvenir de Florence*—immeasurably below, of course, the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies. It has been “cast down deep below the rolling tides of Time”. The *Pathétique*, in short, is *déclassée*.

Yet some will perhaps bestow a few lingering backward glances upon this tonal derelict. They will even, perhaps, return in secret to the most famous (if also the most bedraggled) of post-Bethovenian symphonies as to something whose place is not yet taken, and perhaps not easily to be filled—a projection of the musical imagination that will always, it may be, reward those who are willing to heed the burden of its only too intelligible song.

It has long been the stereotyped thing to say of Tchaikovsky that he was an incurable psychopath. The odd thing about this *cliché* is that it is probably true; though it is too bad that the

facts should seem to give aid and comfort to that army of sentimentalists who have broken their hearts over the wretchedness of Tchaikovsky as revealed, presumably, in the *Pathétique*—those who once goaded Mr. Ernest Newman into remarking testily that to argue that “because there is misery in the music there must be misery in the composer, is like arguing that because there is pepper in the broth there must be pepper in the cook” (to which one answer, at least, might seem to be that, after all, the broth does not issue from the cook, whereas the music does issue from the composer). But Mr. Newman afterward changed his mind about this, and spoke of Tchaikovsky “crying out as he does . . . because he is afraid to go home in the dark. . . . What gives real artistic value to his expression of the terrors that gibbered at him in the night, when his nerves were on edge, is that he really saw them very clearly and has limned them in such a way that each of us can recognize experiences of his own in them. For Tchaikovsky would not have found such a hearing for his woes unless humanity had had similar woes of its own.”

Some have pooh-poohed the idea that Tchaikovsky was unhappy when he composed this symphony, and have adduced the well-known passage in his letter of February 22, 1892, to his brother, written during the composition of the *Pathétique*, in which he speaks of his joy in his work. But there is the equally celebrated passage in the same letter wherein he says: “This symphony is penetrated by subjective sentiment. . . . While composing it in my mind, I often wept bitterly.” What said Mr. George Moore in one of his truthful moments?—“The sadness of life is the joy of art.”

Perhaps the time may come again when we shall all be willing to agree that this too-famous symphony is among the most touching disclosures in the art of our period—a thing of moving sincerity, of a poignancy that at times is overwhelming, that, despite its occasional banality, is filled, in its richest moments, with a searching and unforgettable beauty. If ever music drew its breath in pain, it is in certain accessions of passionate grieving in this symphony, when we seem to hear Tchaikovsky saying to us,—

Absent thee from felicity awhile;

or when, as in other pages of desperate and terrible gayety, it is as if he hoped to sustain himself and us by that insupportable, that heart-breaking cry of his,—

. . . Death cannot spoil the Spring!

To see the Tchaikovsky of this symphony as “a crying child” who is “merely hurt and very sorry for himself”—as “the typical Weary Willie of art”, suffering “from what the advertisements call ‘that tired feeling’; and a scared Willie, in addition” (the wit is Mr. Newman’s)—is vivacious and enjoyable, of course; but there are moments when one wishes that Mr. Newman had been less uproariously funny; or funny in a different way, or in a different connection. For ourselves, we find a truer and more satisfying account of the Tchaikovsky of the *Pathetic* Symphony in these sentences that were written about it years ago, when it was still esteemed: “It seems to us that in this symphony Tchaikovsky realized his own self with a completeness and with all too sad a feeling that must ever remain unique and exceptional in the art of the world. . . . We have before compared this wonderful work, a work which shakes the heart and fills up all one’s lifelong grief for things that are dead, with Shelley’s *Adonais*, which is its counterpart in literature. ‘Time,’ writes Shelley,¹ ‘like a many-colored dome of glass, stains the white radiance of eternity’. Even so, Tchaikovsky in this symphony has stained eternity’s radiance: he has captured the years and bound them into a momentary emotional pang.”

Tchaikovsky dreaded with passionate protest what Sir Thomas Browne called “the iniquity of oblivion”. He feared the thought of death with a shuddering and unceasing terror; and into his most personal and characteristic utterance, the *Pathetic* Symphony (though not only there), he emptied all the dark trouble of his heart—all that he knew of anguished apprehension and foreboding, of grief that is unassuageable, of consternation and despair. Tchaikovsky never divulged the meaning of this singularly affecting music, but its purport is unmistakable. Its burden is the infinite sadness of human destiny and the crushing finality of death; and the hopelessness of the music is as manifest

¹ Shelley wrote “Life”, not “Time”; but the fact does not materially affect the sensitive aptness of Mr. Vernon Blackburn’s comparison.

as it is unrelieved. Tchaikovsky has not here incurred the calm reproach of Krishna: "Thou hast grieved for those who need no grief;" for his grief is centered rather upon the tragic frustrations of his own life; his lamentation is for the precious things of the world that he sees slipping irreclaimably from his grasp. This music is saturated with the precise emotion which moved Edgar Allan Poe when he wrote his heartbroken *Dream Within a Dream*:

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand:
How few! Yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep, while I weep!
O God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! Can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

Tchaikovsky, like the ancient poets of China, believed that "to feel, and in order to feel, to express, all that is poignant and sensitive in man, is in itself a sufficient end"; and certain of those deep and ineradicable moods he chaliceed in music that is indeed, in itself, a sufficient end; music that is piercingly surcharged with the sense of human evanescence—"the pathos of life and death, the long embrace, the hand stretched out in vain, the moment that glides forever away into the shadow of the haunted past".

LAWRENCE GILMAN.